

*Hill-Murray council meets with Congresswoman*

Katy Zillmer, *Oakdale Lake Elmo Review*

U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum visited Hill-Murray High School last week to hear thoughts of senior Student Council members interested in government affairs.

The visit came at a tumultuous time in the country, with the recent shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., at a public event she hosted in Tuscon, concern about the federal budget deficit, and continued debate about health-care reform.

Although McCollum and her staff planned the visit before the Arizona shooting, they chose not to call it off.

McCollum, who is serving her sixth term in the 4th Congressional District, said she knows Giffords and even talked with her in the past about the unexpected ways people can behave at public events when they are concerned about issues.

During the months leading up to Congressional votes on the health-care bill, McCollum received death threats at her office and encountered disruptively angry people at events.

One Hill-Murray student did ask McCollum about her concern for her own safety since Giffords was shot.

McCollum said just as she kept her scheduled meeting with students at Hill-Murray, she will continue to attend public events to be accessible to constituents.

"I have no extra security; my staff has no extra security. So when I go places ... whether it's official or it's just me going grocery shopping or going to Target, I'm on my own," McCollum said.

Overall, the impact on the country and concern for politicians' safety as a result of the Arizona shootings actually had minimal part in the student council's discussion.

Students asked questions about health care, college tuition, the national budget and McCollum's philosophy about working across the aisle with members of the Republican Party.

McCollum, when asked what issue she is most passionate about, said it's providing health care -- especially for children.

A student also asked for McCollum's view on the Republican push to repeal the health care bill.

"Repealing the whole thing is nothing I am very excited about," McCollum said. "I want to get feedback and make adjustments on it. If we just repeal it, I haven't heard what we'll replace it with. So unless I know what I'm going to replace it with, I'm not going to vote to repeal it."

#### A personal connection

Overall, McCollum drew on personal experiences when answering students' questions.

She discussed the effect her parents have had on her life, telling the students about her experience when her mom passed away from colon cancer, her faith, education and lessons her parents shared while she was growing up.

Those in attendance wanted to know how she decided what to study in college and whether she had an early goal of entering politics.

Growing up, McCollum said she learned from her parents about giving back to the community and public service.

When she started her post-secondary education, McCollum said her goal was to be a teacher.

She studied at Inver Hills Community College, and then earned a degree in social studies and education at St. Catherine University.

McCollum started out in local politics, serving on the North St. Paul City Council from 1987 to 1992 and then running for a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives, where she served from 1993 to 2000.

A seat opened up to represent St. Paul and its suburbs in Congress, and McCollum said a neighbor and former city council member encouraged her to enter the election.

"I started out not thinking I was going to be a member of Congress. It wasn't anything I was thinking about in high school or junior high ... I ended up doing what I was doing because I got involved in my community," McCollum told the students. "I'm in Congress because of a lot of people like your parents and a lot of folks like you support me."

#### Representing the future

During her meeting with students, McCollum stressed the importance of hearing their views and concerns.

Afterward, she said she was impressed with the students' inquiries and could sense their concern about the future direction of their country.

"They need to start having their voices that are heard right away. I represent their hopes and their dreams and what they want to see for their future," McCollum said. "They're well prepared, they're well informed. These aren't kids, they're young adults."

Most of all, McCollum expressed the importance of a democracy and her willingness to listen to both sides, as long as there is respect.

"That's kind of the way I've lived my life through growing up and that's what I wanted to instill in my children," she said.

"I really think in order for us to be a vibrant democracy you have to be engaged with giving the students and young children the opportunities ... to make their own decisions and to create an environment in which we have people who want to be lifelong learners."